

August 7, 2013

## Greg Ballard: Indy's children deserve the best education

*Gregory A. Ballard*

This past week, serious questions were raised related to the state's school grading system and the fairness of its implementation. Furthermore, a shadow of doubt has been cast on the hard work of people striving to improve our community's education system. What has been missing from this conversation is a focus on our children and the long term well-being of our city.

People on both sides of the political spectrum feel strongly about our public education system — given the critical role it plays for our children, our neighborhoods and the long-term social and economic vitality of our city. This conviction is appropriate.

The unfortunate reality remains that in spite of the dedication of parents, hard work of educators, non-profits, communities of faith and the support of our business and philanthropic sectors, still too few of our community's children are receiving the education they deserve.

We see this reflected in student pass rates on basic skills tests, non-waiver graduation rates and percentages of students who go on to graduate from college or are prepared for the workforce. We see it reflected in the unemployment rate, an increase in violent crimes committed by young adults and a decrease in the fiscal resources available to invest in the attractiveness and stability of our neighborhoods. This cycle places immense pressure on teachers, administrators, school boards and elected officials to do more with less.

We cannot allow disparate points of view to drive us further apart at a time when the need for collaboration is greater than ever. Despite our collective challenges, we must remain resolute in the belief that every student in every neighborhood has a fundamental right to an excellent education, and in turn, the opportunity to define his or her life path. It is a moral imperative for our children and essential for our city's long-term health and stability.

An information age economy demands an information age education system.

This system begins with a responsibility to provide high quality early childhood education, first and foremost for those who have the least access. We can learn from the work being done by our partners at the United Way, St. Mary's Child Center and Day Nursery. Moving forward, my administration will be a staunch advocate and partner in this work.

We must also ensure that every child in every neighborhood has access to a school that prepares him or her to succeed. This means working together to increase the supply of quality schooling options irrespective of whether they are traditional public schools, public charter schools or private schools. We should seek to replicate the success of schools like IPS' Carle Wilde, Pike Township's Eagle Creek Elementary, Perry Township's William Henry Burkhart, Herron High School, The Oaks Academy, Cardinal Ritter and many others. We must put aside the tired debates that divide us. Our singular focus should be the quality of the education provided our children.

Next, we should strive to blur the lines between high school, postsecondary education and career paths. We can learn from the innovative work being done at Ben Davis University High in Wayne Township, where students are leaving high school with a significant number of college credits. We can learn from

Warren Township, which was recently awarded a \$28 million federal Race to the Top innovation grant, one of 16 grantees from over 1,200 applications. Finally, we must recognize the link between education and workforce development, ensuring we have an adequate supply of talented individuals prepared to meet the demands of a 21st-century economy.

Underlying all of this work must be honest and rigorous self-scrutiny for the purpose of improving rather than casting judgment. Any accountability model should be applied consistently, objectively and fairly to all our city's schools. Furthermore, the state's grading system is a necessary but insufficient measure of what makes a great school. For this reason, it is only one of 25 indicators my office uses to assess the strength of mayor-sponsored charter schools. Mayor Bart Peterson's administration developed this nationally recognized and comprehensive performance framework and my administration has continued to refine and build upon it.

By working together, our community has achieved what many post-industrial cities have struggled to achieve. We've rebuilt our infrastructure, hosted a Super Bowl, spurred significant growth in our urban core and become a globally recognized and competitive city.

If we are to fulfill the potential of our children and our city, we simply must cast aside our differences and work together to create a school system our children deserve, and one that is the envy of the world.